



September 2010

Sue Ann Says: Eating Disorders Are on the Rise...Theater Can Help

I'm always humbled and inspired when someone comes up with innovative and effective ways to create awareness about illnesses to help people better understand them. And then sometimes, I'm completely wowed!

Such was the case last November when we were choosing our 2010 Champions in Women's Health and Robyn Hussa's nomination came across my desk. Eric Christiansen, theater director of Greendale High School in Milwaukee, suggested Robyn because of her work with eating disorders. My first thought was, "This is really cool!" My second thought was, "I gotta tell people about this." (Of course, she was named one our Champions.)

In what is a story in its own right, Robyn left a promising New York City professional theater career to begin serving the needs of girls, women, and their families in Wisconsin by founding NORMAL in Schools (NIS) in 2007. NIS is a nonprofit arts-and-education organization that teaches about the devastating impact of eating disorders and the therapeutic impact of theatre, while exploring related issues such as body image, self esteem, family communication and stress management.

Through the rock musical NOR•MAL, Robyn promotes awareness about eating disorders – which disproportionately affect women and which have long been "taboo" in public talk – throughout Southeastern Wisconsin. The musical program is directed towards college, high school, middle school students, and their parents and other family members. After each performance, a post-show talkback consisting of a panel of women in recovery and professionals who treat eating disorders, takes place.

In a Champion's Own Words

Says Robyn, "NOR•MAL is based on an award-winning, high-energy, New York City rock n' roll piece that has proven to resonate strongly with audience members. NIS is a cutting-edge curriculum that is highly regarded not only in the field of mental health, but in education as well. It unites artistic, medical, and educational merit into one powerful program. We live in a society where it is generally considered normal to conceal feelings and struggles in a constant drive for perfection – often external perfection, achieved through the opinions of others. These beliefs can be detrimental to the formation of a healthy sense of self, which in turn can lead to addictive behaviors and eating disorders. NIS encourages individuals to be "abnormal"...to share our true feelings, allow for mistakes and imperfections, discontinue seeking external validation, and embrace self-love, self-gratitude, and self worth."

Live theater is the best and perhaps the only way to create a substantial and effective awareness about the disease because other mediums and educational attempts in the past have had a minimal impact.

For more information, or to bring the theatrical presentation to your school or community, visit www.normalinschools.org.

Because it all begins with a healthy woman...

Sue Ann Thompson is founder and president of the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF), a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts forums that focus on education, prevention, and early detection of diseases; connects individuals to health resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. To learn more, visit wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.

((Sidebar))

Eating Disorders on the Rise

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, in the U.S., more than half of all teenage girls and nearly one-third of teenage boys use unhealthy weight control behaviors that are characteristic of eating disorders—serious and complex mental illnesses that are more widespread than ever before, with between 25 to 28 million girls and boys, men and women struggling with them now. The Children's Hospital of Wisconsin reports that eating disorders

have begun to affect children as young as five years old, and according to the National Institute of Mental Health, they are also on the rise in diverse ethnic and socio-cultural groups, despite widely-held and erroneous beliefs that only Caucasian teens are seriously affected.

((Sidebar))

Nominate a 2011 Champion in Women's Health Today!

The Champion in Women's Health Award honors individuals who have demonstrated exemplary leadership and devoted themselves to improving the quality of life for women and families in the following health areas: cardiovascular disease, breast cancer, domestic abuse, mental illness, osteoporosis, smoking & alcohol cessation, and general women's health.

To nominate a Champion, visit wwhf.org, and click the Grants & Scholarships tab. Champions will be chosen and notified in November.

Champions in Women's Health award recipients will be honored at a private reception before WWHF's Spring Gala event and during the Spring Gala on Saturday, May 7, 2011.